



THE GLEANER



The Gleaner is a theme-based literary journal edited by the undergraduate students at Delaware Valley University.

We showcase all forms of written work as well as artwork and photography pieces.

This year's theme is *The Sky's The Limit*.

Break through...

"The sky is not the limit. It's just the view."

-Kasseem Dean a.k.a. Swizz Beatz



"Don't tell me I can't do it; don't tell me it can't be done!"

-Howard Hughes, The Aviator



If You Look To Your Left

Nicolas Princetta (front & back cover)

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FLYING HIGH

By: Ben Lashley

It smelled like the inside of a fish bowl. Not a pristine circular bowl with a single goldfish and some nestled colorful pebbles, but more so a bulky rectangular tank filled with backwash and slimy bass. The marine snow never truly 'fell' but instead floated aimlessly without any true direction. I, too, felt as though I was aimlessly floating through the damp crowds of older, washed out men in black. The meshy neoprene jumpsuits clung to their pruned skin much like a latex glove on a sweaty hand. My own wetsuit felt heavy and hot, and while I made my way to Pat, my designated partner, I felt like a marine heaving his armored, canvas camouflage to his rendezvous point.

I've never really thought of myself as adventurous or daring so getting my SCUBA certification was definitely a big step for me. The idea actually came from my dad back when I told him I wanted to work in an aquarium in October. He handed me a vibrant blue pamphlet that was titled, "PADI: Open Water Divers." Now, it's worth mentioning there's some irony in this story; I've been terrified of swimming in open water since I was a little kid. Something about the unknown depths below the surface and what might be lurking, or worse, hunting me down there scares the bejeezus out of me. My dad explained that if I really wanted to work in an aquarium with marine mammals and sharks, most (if not all accredited aquariums) require a certain certification and number of licensed dives on a resume. I knew he was right. I had to work for this certification even if it meant I would need to be totally submerged forty feet under in cold, murky water, suspended in space with no visible bottom in sight. Just that thought alone made it seem like there was only thirty four more feet for me to go.

The process was long. My dad and I first had to drive fifty miles to the nearest PADI dive shop that offered classes for the certification which only allowed six students at a time in a three month period. A process in itself, this paled in comparison to the sheer cost of the entire certification; five hundred dollars to enroll in the class, plus multiple pieces of dive equipment that become structurally and technologically safer the deeper your pockets are, but conversely become ratty and worn if you want to save some cash. Of course that would have been totally fine if I was okay with my tank exploding underwater or my mask flooding in the middle of a dive, rendering me blind and afraid. God, I love diving so much.

After I completed the first step, I was required to attend a class once a week for six weeks in December and January to learn how to not die during a dive.

Fun stuff, right? After the classes were finished, we practiced for another six weeks in the dive shop pool, an indoor body of ninety degree, clear, chlorinated water that did not at all prepare me for what was to come.

I was told that I wouldn't truly be certified until I had successfully completed four dives in two days at Dutch Springs, Pennsylvania, a former rock quarry that was flooded and converted into a recreational PADI diving resort. This was the big one. In April, I would finally face my fear and receive a little plastic card in the mail to commend my bravery, or I'd die.

The morning of my first real dive, I pulled myself out of my dad's car after an hour and a half drive and breathed in the wet air. The muddy grass hugged my sneakers as I walked around to find my dive group. My dad had left to sign in at the campground where all the other divers would be staying the night. I found the group; it was a bunch of men with ages ranging from young adults to whatever age you could imagine a salty fisherman might be. I was noticeably the youngest at sixteen so I felt uneasy. I found my diving partner, Pat, a kind man in his early twenties who looks eerily like the live action actor who played Gaston in *The Beauty and The Beast*. I had met Pat in class and he helped me not get myself killed in the pool practices a few times so we were assigned as diving partners by the divemaster. After unloading all our equipment, it was time to get in the water.

I don't remember getting in the water at all. I only remember the cannonball in my stomach. Somehow, I had gotten to one of the assigned diving spots in the man-made lake and we were told to go down. It was so cold. I desperately clutched my partner's equipment and the rope that lead to wherever we were going as I descended. After maybe five feet, a very large algae ridden plank that was being suspended in the water by the rope came into view. Pat and I eventually reached the 'floor' and we glanced up at the shimmering blanket of light hovering above us. I longed for the surface but all I could do was wait for instructions.

When you dive with a group, there is no way to communicate other than the few hand signals we learned in class. This is, of course, terrifying. The divemaster went around to each pair of new divers and instructed them to do a random skill that we went over in the pool. Each pair would do the skill and the divemaster would give them the, "okay" symbol and move on. As I stood motionless on the plank awaiting my turn, I finally realized just how cold it was. The wetsuit that was designed to keep me warm did its job, but I still felt as though I was wearing a blanket made of dryer sheets in a tub of ice water. In class I learned that the deeper you go, the colder it gets. Sitting there, only fifteen feet underwater, I remembered that the next day I was to be tested by



swimming around an old boeing 747 that was suspended 60 feet below the surface. The cold didn't really provide any danger. My wetsuit was designed to prevent hyperthermia and conserve body heat, but the cold water got my heart racing and my adrenaline pumping. This feeling was coupled with the knowledge that it only takes one small mistake to put a panicked diver in a lethal situation and so I understood the severity of my dilemma. Even after I had ended the first and second dives on that plank and I was safe on land, I knew that death was a real possibility the next day.

I met my dad back at the campground where we were staying the night. He had set up the tent and was reading a book when he saw me lugging my things over to him.

"Well? How was it, Ben?"

"It was really cool," I lied. "I can't wait to do it again, Dad."

He took me to get a late dinner and right after that it was time to go to bed. I didn't sleep. From what I remember, I had never had a sleepless night like that one. I kept thinking about that plane and how deep it was, that if I looked down into the murky water, there was only space, no end. I could be paralyzed by the fear and slip into the depths without my partner looking and I would be lost. SCUBA class taught me that the pressure would cause me to lose consciousness and I would die. I had never been so afraid, except when my dad woke up in the tent and opened it to reveal that it was time to get back in the water.

Before I walked back to the dive site, my dad stopped me to give me some breakfast. He handed me a hot bacon egg and cheese sandwich.

"You know, I just want tell you that I'm so proud of you," My Dad explained. "You're doing something really brave; something that I bet a lot of people couldn't do. You've committed to this and I know that you're going to do awesome today."

I couldn't tell him how afraid I was and I smiled and thanked him for sticking by my side. Then, I walked away.

I managed to complete the third dive and after giving myself a brief pep talk in the bathroom, it was time to get back into the water for the last time. Pat and I swam toward the middle of the quarry for about five minutes until we made it to a very large, gray buoy that seemed to be cemented in the water, completely motionless on the surface. After we were all settled at the buoy,

our divemaster instructed us to go down toward the plane.

My body crossed the threshold into the water and I was floating in space. Looking around, I saw a vast nothingness of dirty teal and violet swirling in all directions. The space was void of all but a straight rope that led nowhere. I moved forward, allowing the frayed line to guide me toward my destination. As it lead me further into nothing, the taut rope made my fingers and arms grow stiff, sucking the life from my body with each tug. With every pull at the line my body felt colder and appeared a darker shade of blue. Just before my vision turned black, something came into view. When you're underwater, it can be hard to discern which directions are up and down. I knew I was going forward into the depths, but somewhere on the rope I must have turned around. I ascended toward the chrome airplane, my final destination that would end my watery hell. I hurriedly swam to the shiny hunk of metal and swam around it doing laps just as my divemaster has instructed me to. I swam as quickly as possible, eager to not only end my decent, but because I had finally done it. I was flying high beside the plane, feeling the moist clouds brush across my face. Now I was flying; free of my fear, my anguish, and my guilt, I soared through the air. I felt Pat put his hand on my shoulder and he brought me back to Earth.

The water gradually heated until finally I broke the surface. The sun welcomed me with a blanket of warm light.

"Are you alright?" asked Pat. "I think I might have lost you there for second."

"I'm okay. Sorry about that - I must've gotten a bit carried away. That was really fun."

Weeks later, a small plastic card came in the mail. On one side it was a brilliant gold and on the other was a picture of me. My dad came over to look at the diving licence he helped me earn.

"You did it," he said. "Well, we did it. You wouldn't have made it anywhere if I didn't drive you everywhere now would you? But hey, I'm still so proud of you, son."

His dry humor aside, I know now that he was the reason I didn't give up and sink to the bottom during my last dive. Without his reinforcement, I'm sure I would have perished, or at least failed the diving test. I thanked him again and he cooked a celebratory dinner. The steaming hot salmon melted in my mouth and I remembered the fresh water smell in the air that chilly first day of testing. Those were good times.



GET THE KIDS OUT OF THIS POEM

By: Meg Clawson

You want to go back
to our Adirondack honeymoon
like a beggar holding a makeshift sign,
trying to make eye contact
with me, the driver stopped at red.

The cardboard says:
Remember mourning doves nested on the cabin's skylight?
Remember thousands of frogs singing louder than a cityscape?
Remember the hike to the quaking Aspen?
Remember hundreds of fanning Monarch wings covering its bark?
Like all the butterflies in Costa Rica commuted to that one tree.
Remember their bodies, folding, unfolding.

GREETING SEASON

By: Jordan Burbage

there's a shift. voices rolling on air
like dust shook free from popcorn ceilings.

lip-born breezes float by café tables
sprinkling oh hey, yeah sure, if you're able.

soft, sidewalk feelings settle into a pocket
swing from ends of auburn, blush, now wool.

tomorrow, rain will fall and paint it all
Transparent to the bottom of your shoe.

UNDER THE BLUE DOME

By: Alesandra Temerte, Central Bucks East High School, 1st place, Prose, 11-12th Grade

As I reach across the keyboard, my arm knocks over the open coffee cup beside me. Dark liquid seeps over the metal table.

“Sh—“

I scramble from the computer station to find something to clean the mess up before anyone notices—I could be fired for ruining the station’s technology. The door’s ocular sensor scans my eye and slides open. I shuffle quietly through the hallway, slipping into the supply closet and clicking the door shut behind me.

I’m gathering a bundle of absorbency sheets when I hear the sound of heels clicking down the hallway, followed by the thump of steel-toed boots—a token sign that security guards are around. The footsteps fall to a silent stop right outside the supply closet.

I freeze.

Their muffled voices murmur with urgency. I slowly move to press my ear against the cold door, but I can only make out snippets of their conversation.

“Today is End Day...”

It’s a woman’s voice—our President’s voice. I shift in shock. What is the President doing in the dome’s engineering building?

Her voice lowers even more and I strain my ears to hear what she says.

“Shutting down the dome... the Outside... files... need resource conservation.”

Shutting down the dome? I whirl in a panic to gather my things, so I can rush back to my office before anyone notices I’m gone. In my frenzy, I trip over a box and crash to the ground.

The President’s voice stops. I bite my lip in fear, hoping the sound was dampened enough by the thick door.

When the clicking of heels and thumping of metal resume, I let out the breath I was holding. I rush to get the rest of the sheets together, waiting for the steps to fade before escaping the closet.



But as I approach my office doors, I see the President and security guards already standing there.

I whirl around to run in the opposite direction, dropping my box of absorbency sheets.

The President whips around at the sound of the thud. When she sees the supply box in my arms, realization dawns on her face. She knows I heard.

“Catch her!” the President shouts.

They’re shutting down the dome.

Metal crashes against metal as the security guards chase after me. I pass by rows upon rows of office rooms just like mine.

I can’t let them shut down the dome—it would kill all of us. Only members of the government would survive with bunkers that connect to other domes in the Outside.

I take a sharp right.

Left. Right. Left. Left.

I need to get to the building’s exit, but the distance between me and the guards is closing.

I won’t make it.

I desperately press the button outside the main control room instead. The door scans my eyes and I tumble in before it slides shut again.

I can’t stop—they’re still coming.

I jump into a computer chair and start typing away. Before long, a red light flashes above the door to the programming center, indicating the scanners are deactivated and the doors are permanently shut.

There’s banging outside, and I know this only buys me some time.

I search through the programs.

WATER SYSTEM

FOOD REGULATION

CITIZENRY

DOME MAINTENANCE

I hit dome maintenance.

I inspect the code until I see the line:

```
if (date == "final")  
{  
    system.out.println(terminateSequence);  
}
```

I delete the line, knowing it's the best I can do with the minute I have left before the guards bypass the scanner.

I click RUN.

Please work.

SYSTEM OVERRIDE INITIATING

...

PROGRAM FAILURE.

"No," I gasp.

DOME TERMINATION WILL INITIATE IN FIVE MINUTES.

What have I done?

The doors whip open as alarms begin to scream, and the guards storm into the control room. I abandon the computer, tumbling under one of the guard's metal-suited arms to make it back out the door and into the hallway.

I sprint for the dome exit.

A mechanical voice penetrates the air: "BUILDING LOCKDOWN IN TWO MINUTES."

I won't make it if the doors lock before I get there. I look back to see the President standing with a pale face. The dome wasn't supposed to start



shutting down until this evening if I hadn't intervened. She's going down with us.

The guards aren't chasing after me anymore. What's the point if we're all about to die? Once the dome is down, we'll all suffocate in the Outside air. I change my path, throwing myself into the observatory room.

"BUILDING LOCKDOWN IN ONE MINUTE."

I wait for an announcement about the dome's shutdown, but nothing comes.

I sit down to catch my breath. When I look up to the ceiling of the observatory, I see the whole world above me. The screen of the dome reflects a blue sky of pink clouds.

I know it's not real. I know the Outside is a scorched orange earth and a dead brown sky. But in this moment, that illusion of a blue sky is all I have. I've always hoped I'd live until the day we'd be able to breathe in the Outside again, but my mother always told me it would never happen. She worked for the government. She knew about the shutdown. She found out, and she was going to tell me, and that's why they took her.

That's why she told me the sky's the limit—because I'd never live to see

POSSIBILITY

By: Victoria Blonder

She never finished peppermints
Or her afternoon cup of tea
She never dried herself with towels
Just below the knee

She would never be enough for him
And that she could not see

But refusing all these tiny things
Filled her with

Possibility

THE INITIATION KILL

By: Emily Aukamp

Crunch, Crunch. The leaves crackle underfoot as I walk up the mountain. It would have been better if it rained last night, I thought. When it rains the ground is softer and makes less noise when traveling through the forest. Walking with another person also helps because it sounds more like you have four legs instead of two, something more natural to the forest creatures. But then if I was with someone else that would lessen the significance of today.

Today I have to do this on my own. 4:00 in the morning, stalking up the side of a mountain on my way to the hole, I smile through the burn in my muscles and my pack digging into my shoulders. The dark trees loom high above me. They are my protectors during my journey. I am lead my instinct and recognition. You don't need the lights at night to move through your house just as my feet know where to take me along the trails. You see, this is home. This is a family tradition. Something we take great pride in.

Going up to the mountains to hunt is something I look forward to every year. Even when I was young, it didn't matter if I actually got to go out into the woods to hunt, just being there was enough for me. It's different now. Now I'm out on my own. Now it's finally my time to be initiated.

Trudging an hour along the de-commissioned logging trails, I finally make it to the hole. Unlike my uncles and cousins who hunt out of tree stands, I prefer to stay on the ground. In a stand, angles change and you don't see what the deer see. However when you hunt on the ground, the playing field levels. It's more of a challenge. My spot is called 'the hole' because that's pretty much what it is—a hole in the ground. Seated in the saddle of the valley, I dug out a divet between two large trees. Taking large logs and limbs, I built up a wall on the lower side and covered it with leaves and greenery. Some luxury amenities have been added, such as gun hooks and a bucket to sit on, but the true marvel of the hole is its functionality. I have complete visual 360 degrees around and can even stand, all while remaining hidden. Now, tell me if you can do that in a tree stand?

After sliding into the hole, I prepare for the day. Setting my pack down, putting on my jacket, loading my gun, making sure the safety is on, and having a good stretch are all part of my well-worn routine. I look at my watch and notice it's just about 5:30, not quite time for the sun to peek over the hills. I lean back against the tree and close my eyes as I think of my childhood adventures



here in this sacred hollow.

Coming up to the mountains was the greatest privilege anyone could receive in my family. It is the most wonderful place on earth, whether child or adult. After a long six-hour drive filled with anticipation, the road turns from asphalt to stone to dirt. We become engulfed within the woods. Only stillness and silence to keep us company. Perfect solitude. No neighbors for miles. Away from it all.

My family owns this little 300 acre slice of heaven. Our old white farmhouse sits in the middle, a rustic barn complementing its style. A small creek runs alongside the lawn with a wooden bridge that goes Clank clank CLANK as you drive across. My childhood was built in this hollow as we raced through the woods on the logging trails, climbed the highest trees scouting for turkey eggs, and conducted the time-old process of constructing dams in that little creek.

While all these childhood games were fun, I fought with my desire to join the 'grown-ups' and truly be part of the family. I wanted to hunt. You see hunting is kind of a rite of passage in my family. Fathers take their children out in the early cold mornings to sit in the woods and teach them about things around them—nature, animals, life. It's a time of connecting and growing. Hunting is almost an art form that is passed down from generation to generation. Paw Paw showed me how to read tracks. Dad and I cut lanes to ensure clear shots. Uncle Duane taught me how to recognize animal patterns and behaviors. I learned how to understand how nature works without human intervention. These are the things you can't learn in a classroom or out of a book. You need to experience and practice these skills to fully master them, something I am still working on to this day.

I think back to the nights I was awakened by the bustle of activity downstairs and low murmur of voices. It was morning, but a glance outside would make you think it was night. I crept down the worn wooden stairs and peeked around the corner to watch. The Hunters were preparing to head out. Bullets were recounted, backpacks checked, laces tied up and deer scent was prayed on. I followed silently behind in my pajamas, gazing with wide eyes. Being too small at the time to go with them, I envied my older cousins who climbed onto the racks of the fourwheelers. Dan tipped his hat to me, AJ smirked with gloat, and Heather would share a small smile in attempt of comforting me before they all took off in a cloud of red exhaust. Standing there in the crisp morning air, I trailed the multitude of headlights as they each trekked up the sides of the hollow to their spots. Eventually the last light would flick off and

the valley was once again only lit by the glow from only the moon. Then I would turn back to the house, slowly climb the stairs and go back to bed until Maw Maw would wake me for breakfast.

It was hard for a young child to stay content when they couldn't even go to just sit in the stand. Being the youngest grandchild, all of my cousins were out in the woods hunting while I was stuck inside with Maw Maw. I would inch closer and closer to the farmhouse door, just grasping for the door knob when I was caught.

"Emily, you know you can't go outside. Remember child, a strat bullet travels far." Maw Maw would always tell me. "Now come help me clean these dishes."

I would sigh, retreat from the door and obey her word. When I was able to escape the list of chores sentenced by my grandmother, I found myself seated by the hand-held radio. I listened to the sparse chatter between stands and hoped to hear some inside information about deer movement or sightings. It made me feel at least a little closer to the action.

The best days occurred when a shot would ring out through the valley, penetrating the farmhouse walls and echoing through the hollow as it bounced off the mountains. This being a regular occurrence, I learned how to figure out roughly where the shot came from by how loud it was or how many times it echoed after. When I thought that the shot came from someone in our camp I would jolt up from my seat and look to Maw Maw.

"Calm down child," she soothed. "We'll just have to wait until they all get back." However sometimes I noticed the thin curl of her lip as she turned away, giving me the hint that it was going to be an eventful evening.

It was when the hunters came back and one was dragging a heap of fur that the fun began for me. In the large wooden barn we tied up the back legs and hauled the stiff carcass, whether be doe, buck or bear, off the blood-stained floor. That was my job. I would perch on the side rail, wait for my cue to crank it up higher and watch. This was a family gathering of sorts for my family. As more and more family members and even curious hunters from other camps came back from the woods, we all congregated in the dusty barn. Laughter and chatter filled the air as we all stood around the kills in the middle while those who shot them began to butcher. I learned so much as I followed their skilled hands with my eye. Knowing what to cut first and where, how to section off the meat for transport, and what to keep or toss is all valuable knowledge because one day I too would be in the middle of our little pow wow,



perhaps even today.

* * *

I slowly draw my eyes open and glance around. The sunlight was just beginning to peak through the leaves, scattering its warmth to the cool carpet of leaves below. Glancing at the time, my face stretches into a small smile—6:30 am, time to begin. I sit up straight and turn on all my senses to the world around me. The crisp air nips at my nose. The forest starts to awaken. Birds flutter from tree to tree looking for the ripest berry. Squirrels dart inconsistently searching for their most prized possession. I breathe in deeply, letting the woody earth and pine-filled aromas fill my entire body.

I scan cautiously from side to side, first moving my eyes and then my head slowly after. Hunting can be a conflicting skill at times. Everything you do leads up to a few precious seconds, but leading up to then everything is in slow motion. Turning back from looking behind me, I catch something out of the corner of my eye. Another thing about hunting is that you never are actually looking for the entire deer. You look for a tail, a nose, a eye, a antler. And I am pretty sure that was a flick of a tail to my left.

Moving at half the speed as before, I continue to turn towards where I saw the flicker and scan the entire area in that direction. Minutes pass by as I continue to search the woods. Just as I am about to relax, I see it again and this time I connect a tail with a eye and ear. The entire deer comes together about seventy-five yards down the slope on the lower logging trail. I pull out my binoculars, bring them to my eyes and try to count points. A buck must have at least three points on its antlers for it to be considered a legal shot, unless of course you are a junior hunter. I begin counting: three, four, five... no, seven! Seven points, maybe even more with brow tines! That's larger than any of my cousins or father has shot!

My body suddenly feels like a bee trapped in a bottle. Buzzing constantly with adrenaline, but completely still from the outside. The world around me slows—I along with it. Focusing only on the buck, I do not waver my eyes as I reach ever so slowly behind me until the familiar smooth wood of my rifle bushes against my fingertips. Grazing contently, the buck is unalarmed. I gradually extend my body to stand. The deer picks his magnificent rack up and looks in my direction; I halt immediately.

Our staring contest seems to drag on for eternity, almost as if we are sizing the other up for their worth. I hold my breath, not daring to move an inch. He blinks. I wait. His nose twitches. I wait. He tosses his head slightly. I wait.

Finally bored with our little game, he chews the leaves he held in his mouth and lowers his head to continue feeding. I pause for another ten seconds before I raise the gun, its butt nestling deep in the pocket of my shoulder. Muscle memory takes over as the rifle and I become one, an extension of my arm. I close my left eye. My right peers down the scope. The buck fills my vision. Distributing my weight evenly, I stand in a line, the tip of the barrel being my point aiming straight for my target. Having now traveled a few yards along the tree line, I follow him through my scope, waiting for my opportunity. Side-stepping to reach for a particular branch, I recognize the opening.

My aim falls right behind the shoulder, halfway up his belly. It's just like when I sat at the dining table after every meal with Uncle Duane. Scattered hunting magazines everywhere and me with my small hand clutching a red crayon. Every night at the cabin we remained at that table until every picture of the magazine told the story of a different scenario. The lines of optimal shooting angles and distances all ended at the same place, that little spot on the chest, otherwise known as the heart. However now I don't have a crayon in my hand and I'm not at the dining room table. I set the cross arrows right in line with where the heart is. Regulating my breathing, I move my finger to the safety and click it off. My pulse quickens but my exterior remains still, ice cold. I am ready. This is the moment when I finally am truly inducted into the family. Finally it will be me in the middle of the circle while everyone else gazes in awe of my kill. It will be me who is telling the story at the dinner table with vivid detail, bringing everyone else with me to this exact moment. I will finally have forged that highly sought after connection that everyone else shared. I am journeying across the chasm that separates the elders of my family from the rest. It is finally the time for my induction kill.

My pointer finger smooths over the groove of the cool trigger. Keeping the cross arrows behind his shoulder, my finger slowly starts to squeeze the trigger. I brace for impact.

Suddenly, it's gone.

Panic starts to bubble in my chest and dread fills my stomach. If I just missed the buck of a lifetime, I will never forgive myself. Looking around through the scope, I try to find something, anything that resembles a deer. Seconds stretch to minutes and my hope is diminishing. What did I do wrong? I rack my brain, desperately trying to come up with an answer. Then a voice comes to me from the corners of my memory:

"Looking good girlie! Soon we'll have to sign you up for competition!" my



uncle commented clapping me on the back. I just shot a round at the shooting range at 150 yards with the new rifle I was given for my birthday.

“Yah she’s doing well, except for one thing,” Paw Paw noted. “You have to remember to keep both eyes open. Out here on the range is one thing, but when you are in the woods and following a deer through your scope, if you only have one eye open you’ll lose him in the trees and leaves. Open both of your eyes, get ahead of him and let the buck walk into your cross arrows. You’ll never miss a shot.”

I suck in a breath and I curse myself, Of course! I open my left eye and wait until it focuses into place. I comb through the forest again, determined to recover my conquest. With both my eyes open, I notice a tree only twenty-five yards higher up on my left with a branch that seems a little too fuzzy. Narrowing my vision, I discover that it’s not a branch at all but an ear. A second later the buck steps out from behind the tree. My breath is taken away at his stature. I set my scope in front of his chest, aim, wait. With conviction in my blood, I will not fail. I will make this be my time and my kill. He steps forward. I squeeze the trigger.

Bang. Thud. Inducted.

THE LIVING DEAD

By: Paige Reali, Berks Catholic High School, 1st place, Poetry, 9-10th Grade

If only the grass didn't get tall so quickly
And the shadows didn't run so long
But time passes
An endless current
And I am a minnow
Caught in its force

If only I could reach up to the sky
Pluck the sun from its place among the stars
And weave the sun beams into art
Making this life of mine what I see in my dreams

But my dreams are no longer special to me
They are no longer a candle I hold close in the winter
They are no longer little pieces of my soul like they once were
Instead, I wake up
And I cannot remember what I dreamed
I don't even know if it was a nightmare
I can't remember
So I sit up, and turn off my alarm
I am not mad, I am not sad
I just am

If only my passions hadn't died so quickly
Maybe if I still had a little fire left, I could
Ignite my soul
But ashes don't burn
And I am ashes

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down, I think
Because I am not alone in this colorless world
People pass around me, by me, through me
They look at me, they hear me, they touch me
But they do not see me, they do not listen to me
And they do not feel me
I just exist

I think
It is a pandemic
And we are all infected
With this blandness and mediocrity



DOPPELGANGER

By: Jessica (Jesse) Zhao, North Penn High School, 1st place, Poetry, 11-12th Grade

There is a girl who sits behind me in class,
looking exactly like me
talking exactly like me
dreaming exactly like me

still succeeding, unlike me
(a 4.0 gpa and perfect disciplinary record precedes her introductions).

She doodles stories on scraps of paper between tests too simple for her
and talks about dreams of fantasy to her eager listeners,
so tantalizingly of this world of reality.
She's enthralling. She's perfect

and my mind sickens like the stomach sickens to sugar
whenever I witness her.

She's the student that teachers would love to praise,
the daughter that mothers would wish they could have
the friend that would be so hard to hate
and yet I cannot help but to hate her

Even as I continued to fantasize about her
and how to steal her perfect life for my own.

She sits behind me in class, and she is of no use to me
alive. Because of course not, Little Miss Perfect has no reason
to share help with Little Miss Destitute,
who sits in front of her with poorer grades and poorer attitude

with pushed averages of 80s to compare to her perfect hundreds,
though we shared the same wondering creativity (but only her's was noticed)

The last I saw her was her shadow, stretching from behind
when she was dreaming again about the colors of the sky
from the off-limits school roof (she could get away with murder if she tried).
Christ almighty, I could almost hear her honest tone, singing Nirvana

To the blues and and peaches and lavenders and golds yawning above her,
on the evening when she dreamed her last

And blew a kiss to the asphalt, crushing
her ribs and my dreams, all at once
and leaving me alone with myself again,
with noone sitting behind me.

DUST

By: Zoeya Jouravska

The past is a nice place to dwell in sometimes...
I remember feeling loved, and cared for, and played with.
Now I'm just an old stuffed animal
Ashamed of my tears
Ashamed of my stains
You keep me around because you're used to me,
But I'm just hanging out as part of the décor.
...Collecting dust

There's nothing in common between you and I
Once again I am yearning for your attention,
You tell me you love me
But you don't play with me
You don't have the time
Or the will
So I'm back to decorating a shelf
Growing my kingdom of dust

You proudly parade your new, expensive toys before me
Even though you know it makes me sad
Because I will never be,
A \$2000 TV
I will never be,
A collection of designer boots
I will never be,
A New Year's getaway to Siam
I'll just sit back on my throne of dust
Anxious and wary of a gentle breeze



LIFE'S BEAT

By: Alexis Jackson

I think I remember it being one of those extremely dewy mornings. The type of dewy that you can see the water droplets beaded up on the grass, droplets that shimmer to the eye. The type of dewy that you can feel the water drip from high up in the trees and can see the thick moisture in the air.

It was just another school day. I was in gym class and today we were playing volleyball. The big bright gym lights, the squeak of sneakers on the evenly waxed gym floor and the slight smell of sweat surrounded us all. The feeling of burning from bumping the ball back and forth was followed by the slowly appearing red welts on my forearms. I was playing with Emily, my best friend, when I suddenly felt uneasy. It was a weird feeling, like you know you are physically there, but at the same time you feel like you are in another place. Like your existence is something inside of a dream, a time where pinching yourself sounds like the perfect reality check. My vision started to go black. I felt like I was going to pass out. Instead of doing what a normal person would do and sit down I decided that I would just play through it. What's a little passing out with a slight chance of eating concrete? I kept playing until my heart was racing, uncontrollably.

I went to Mrs. Overly. The nurse quickly came pushing along something I really did not want, a wheelchair. Man, I just wanted to walk myself, it was so embarrassing getting pushed down the hall in a wheelchair. It reminded me from the time when I was a kid and had to be pulled around in a wagon. Not a stroller, but a wagon because little two-year-old me had broken my leg and was put in a body cast from the chest down. Not a fun time let me tell you. Even though my heart literally felt like it was going to beat out of my chest and run away, I still had the chance to think about how much I really didn't want to be in this wheelchair.

The nurse moved me from the wheelchair to one of those nasty beds that every sick kid lays on. She proceeded to take my blood pressure and heart-rate, I focused on the pressure as the cuff got tighter and tighter until the point I could feel my heartbeat in my arm. "That cannot be right" she said. My pulse was at 180 beats per minute, laying there. She monitored my heart rate and it would not slow down. I started to become physically tired even though I was only sitting here. The type of tired that feels like moving is impossible. The type of tired that tempts you to sleep for days. So tired that your eyes feel like they are being sucked shut and you have difficulty keeping them open.

My thoughts raced. So many things were running through my mind. The thing I thought about most is how we all always take our life for granted. Life is a precious thing and we always take it to be ours, something that is solid and concrete, and act like it is our decision on how long we have it for. This is a major misconception because life is like thin porcelain. At any moment it can shatter into a million pieces. Remain changed forever. We can make decisions throughout our life, but never do we have the capability of deciding how long we have it for. Life is not an object to be thrown around, it is a state to cherish and appreciate.

It happened in a blur, but next thing I knew the ambulance had arrived and the EMT's were getting all the equipment out. Within the next 75 seconds I was covered with all different types of medical instruments to track my blood pressure, pulse, oxygen level, and even prepped for an IV. If you ever experienced what I was going through at this moment you know how scary it can be. You are left with an uncertainty of what is happening and what will be happening. As they continued to take my vital signs, shining that nasty bright light into my eyes to see how fast my pupils would react and drilling me with questions, I felt more and more overwhelmed. The EMT's said to my parents, "We consider her stable and offer you the option to drive her for further medical attention". My parents decided they would drive me to my cardiologist which was thirty minutes from the school. I was carried to the car. With my dad driving it felt as though we flew. Everything outside of the car window flashed by, all colors swirling together like those of an impressionists painting. The colors were the perfect representation of how I felt in my mind, which was wild and swirling. I can't even remember what I was thinking because there were too many things to focus on.

Then it hit me. I still can feel it in my chest. My heart started to pound faster. So fast I couldn't even count the beats. The beats were so rapid and hard my entire chest was moving. It felt like my heart might explode. My parents became more worked up than me. All sign of color drained from my Dad's face, he was as white as a sheet of paper. My Mom was trying her best to stay strong, but tears were slowly trickling down her face. They did everything they could to try and soothe me, but I couldn't soothe them back. My mind was scattered everywhere like candy from a busted pinata. I could not focus enough to tell them that it would be alright. To tell them how much I loved them. To tell them how thankful I was for everything they have done for me. This event they can thank for more than one grey hair on their head.

We were so close to my cardiologist. My cardiologist had known me on a



personal basis from the many appointments I had. I was recently diagnosed with POTS (Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome) and was still learning how to deal with the symptoms associated. My Dad carried me into the lobby of my cardiologist and Mom frantically explained the situation to the secretary. She immediately went for help. I was sitting there for two minutes, but it felt like eternity. I kept thinking these were the last moments of my life, scared doesn't even come close to how I felt. My heart was running its own race. I was made top priority; all the doctors and nurses focused their attention on me. It was like the world itself stopped and I was the center of the universe.

I was taken into a bright room that smelled heavily of alcohol and cleaning solutions. It was set up like every doctor's office with the table for the patient to lay on, another separate chair and the doctor's stool. I could hear the doctors all murmuring to each other and heard one say, "we need it". Another ambulance was called. One of the doctors looked at me and said, "You are on the verge of a heart attack, your heart is currently beating at 208 beats per minute". This number will remain engraved in my mind forever.

The ambulance arrived with a drug, adenosine, a drug that saved my life. The drug had to be used in a very particular manner, so particular that it meant life or death for the patient. The scary thing is that I was that patient. I was that person faced with either life or death. My heart just kept thumping I can still feel it in my head, thumping. The doctor said, "this drug is going to stop your heart". At first, I thought that maybe I misunderstood them, but they must have seen the look of confusion on my face because they repeated, "yes this drug is going to stop your heart and you will most likely pass out". I then realized. I realized they were going to stop my heart.

These doctors of all different sizes and ages shared one thing in common, a serious expression on their face. The type of serious that it is almost hard to look at without feeling it yourself. Even with the situation at hand they all handled it in a calm and collected manner. I don't know if this was a "calm" to keep me relaxed or a calm because they were comfortable with what they were doing. I like to think that it was because they were comfortable with what they were doing but I will never know for sure.

My heart finally stopped pounding or rather stopped beating all together. For a couple of seconds every muscle in my body seized up and I couldn't breathe at all. It felt like everything in time had frozen like the hand of a clock when the battery dies. Everything just stopped moving. I couldn't feel anything and the only thing that I could focus on was the doctors

surrounding the table, the table I was laying on, the table I could not feel underneath me. When the second drug kicked, my heart started to beat normally, I was sucked back into reality. No more thumping in my chest, I felt calm, relieved.

This day was one of the most stressful and chaotic days I have ever went through in my entire life. I hope this record is never broken by me or anyone else. This day would diagnose me with another medical condition known as SVT (Super Ventricular Tachycardia) that would later require surgery to fix. I thought most about how lucky I was to survive; how lucky I was to have the advanced medical skills and technology available today. How lucky I was to have people who were willing to take their time to help me, to save my life. How lucky I was to be alive.

Yes, I was faced with a challenge and yes, I made it through with the help of others. I will say it wasn't easy. But what in life is easy? What does it mean for something to be easy? Everybody's definition of easy varies in some way. My parents, Emily and sister never faced any heart issues, but this does not mean that they haven't faced their own struggles. If we all experienced the same things life would be boring, like a book with no cover. Nobody would stand out and be known for the person they are. Easy experiences can be nice, but they do not teach the lifelong lessons that we get from facing challenges. Challenges like the one I faced and continue to face today demonstrate true character.

This event has turned me into the person I am today. It has taught me to live life to the fullest, well kind of. It has taught me that volleyball can be a dangerous sport. It has taught me to be strong on the outside, even when I am freaking out on the inside. It has taught me that there is light at the end of the tunnel no matter how long, dark and scary it may seem. My heart and the health issues associated, have taught me what life is, a precious gift. They have taught me to never give up, even though sometimes this may be your only option. It has taught me how ridiculous self-pity is because somebody else always has it worse. It has taught me to be happy for every second, even though honestly speaking this will never happen. Earth is just a passing point before our final destination of heaven. Everything happens for a reason. It may be crazy, but I am thankful for this day and the pounding beat of my heart. The beat of life.







Damn Powerlines!!

Kirsten Schroy



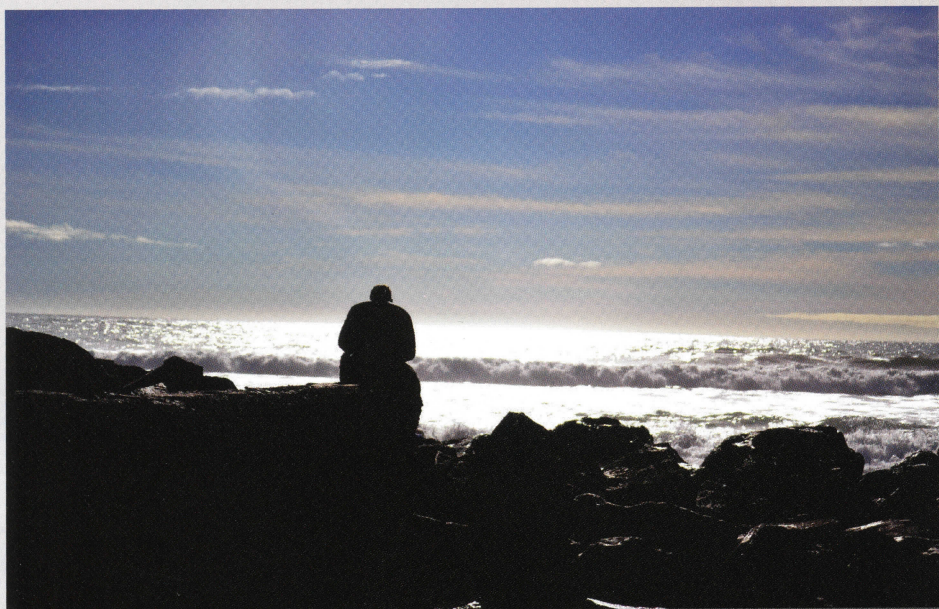


Having a Friend for Lunch

Bryan Huerta

Young Man and the Ocean

Nicolas Princetta



Underflower

Veronica Feibusch



Took Off My Head

Patricia Cruz



Charmer

Bryan Huerta



Count the Shadows

Bryan Huerta





Do You See My Contact Lens?

Bryan Huerta



Self Reflection

Christina Rizzo



Alone

Andrea Drumboire



Soles de Puerto Rico

*Lizmary Ortiz,
Arts Academy at Benjamin Rush*





Reflecting Time

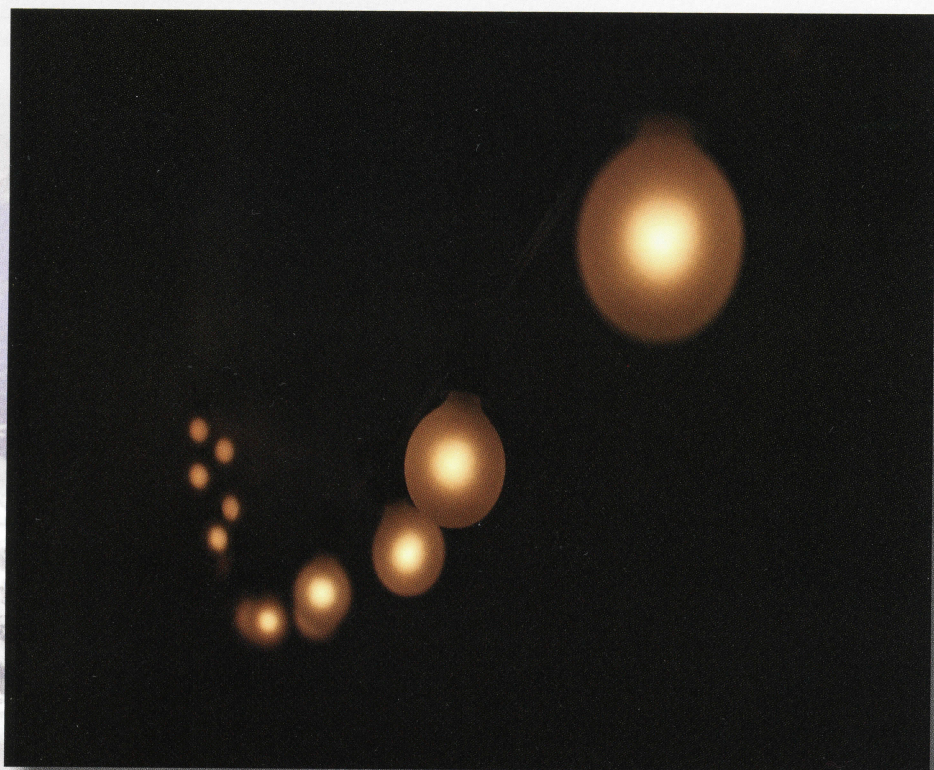
Emily Kennedy



Beautiful Endings

Emily Kennedy





Light the Way

Emily Hollis



Feather

Andrea Drumbore



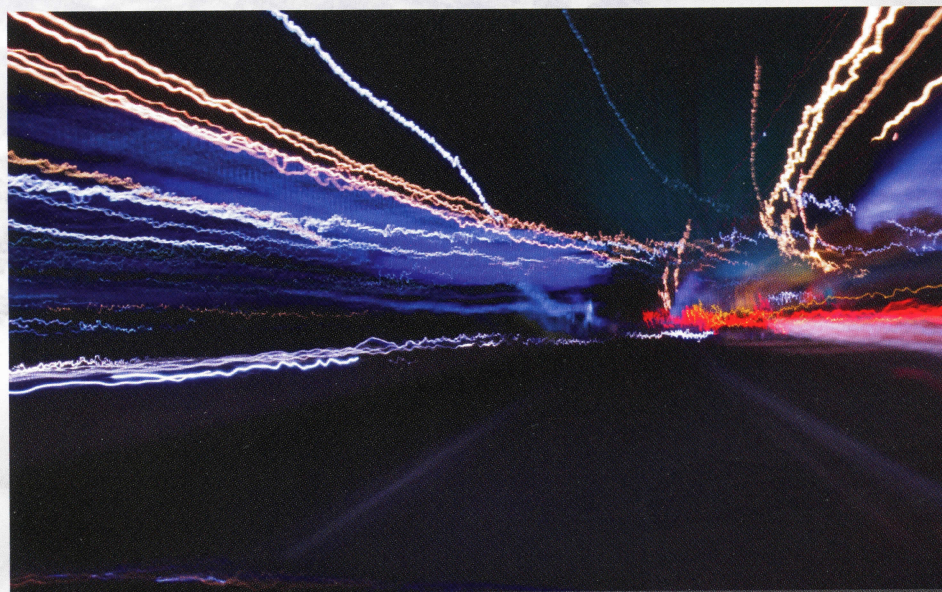


Fuego en el Cielo

*Lizmary Ortiz,
Arts Academy at Benjamin Rush*

Cops

Patricia Cruz



Driving

Patricia Cruz

Twilight

Leyla Danis



Neo Noir

Katie DeAngelo



SLATE CITIES

By: Paige Reali, Berks Catholic High School, 1st place, Prose, 9-10th Grade

The sun is dying. Scientists say it's morphing into a red giant, a state where the hydrogen supply has been depleted and the sun expands to be hundreds of times its original size. This rapid growth will vaporize the three closest planets. First Mercury, then Venus, and finally Earth.

At first, the increased temperature will cause water to evaporate quickly, forming a sort of hazy cloud over the whole planet. It'll protect us for a while, but once the oceans start boiling and water becomes scarce? We're screwed whether or not we get vaporized.

Right now, things are bad. That hazy cloud I was talking about? It's hanging in the sky, a deep, rolling mess of greenhouse effect. Water is hard to come by, and snow is only in the history books no one bothers reading anymore. You can't see the stars, haven't been able to in a while, and the ice caps are farther gone than the polar bears. Scientists estimate we've got a year or so before things get really bad, and death starts hitting our numbers harder than it has in a couple millennia. Even now, with most of the surviving population below ground, it's suicide to go out during the day.

If you're exceedingly athletic, powerful, or brilliant—congratulations! You survive. You get a one-way ticket to the Heaven Bound, a self-sufficient spaceship to Mars. There, you'll get a nice view of the stars and enough freeze dried bananas to last you a lifetime. The rest of us? Well, there certainly aren't enough resources on this broken husk of a planet to support another 7.5 billion people. The most gifted and brilliant will procreate in space while us leftovers burn up and collapse from dehydration.

In the end, it doesn't matter if we're incinerated or struck down by heat-stroke. The nobodies of the world are dead already.

Lorena and I stand at the edge of the cavern, waiting for Duke to finish up.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

For the first time since we've come up with the plan, Lorena looks unsure. She glances to Duke's silhouette at the end of the cave. "I don't know," she says quietly. But it's the only chance we've got."

I swallow, my fingers tightening along the messenger bag. I think of all the security I've scouted in and around the Heaven Bound these past few weeks. I've seen people try to break in. I've seen what happens when they're caught. Our odds are not good. I don't say as much to Lorena. She knows it as well as I do.

When Duke finally catches up, I see what he's left behind. Our names, carved into the rock wall of the cave. I know Duke means it as a way of telling the next people who come along that someone was here, but I can't help thinking he has made us gravestones.

Duke grips his bag strap so tightly his knuckles are white. "I don't think we should go." "You want to die?" I ask. "Because if we don't move now, it's just a matter of time."

Streaks of grime coat Duke's face, bruises stretch beneath his eyes, and stubble sprouts like weeds on his jaw. He's spent sleepless days staring up at the rocky underground we've made home, and I know he has thought of stowing away on Heaven Bound. We all have.

"We can make it," Lorena says, her chin jutting out, defiant. Gently, she pries his fingers from the bag strap and holds his hand. Duke looks at her, his jaw clenched. He shakes his head.

"Lorena." I already know Duke will go. He'd follow Lorena to the edge of oblivion and take that leap with her too.

Before things were bad, Duke and Lorena dated steadily. I think he was planning on proposing. But then the riots came. They came bloody and hot, stinking of panic and fear, of people realizing too late they were dying.

A lot of people met their ends in them, including Lorena's father. Duke was with him, and he refuses to say what happened. Lorena screamed, begged, threatened, but Duke would not say how her father died. Only that he did.

The morning after we broke the news, when Lorena was trying to hide her tears, I found him at the edge of the cavern. Jaw clenched, posture rigid, eyes slate.



"I promised him, Nikolai," he whispered, his voice hoarse and painful." I promised him I'd get her out."

Lorena is Duke's reason for living, why he didn't just throw it all away like so many of the others. She's why he isn't dead.

My reason isn't so selfless. I refuse to die when I'm just starting to live. In a world of bloody sunsets and death sentences, the stars are calling. When the sun was kind and the schools were open, I dreamed of being an astronaut. Mom was an Air Force pilot, and she taught me how to fly. The hum of the engine in my ears, the register of the instruments under my fingertips, the vast emptiness of the sky—it mesmerized me. And I wanted more. I still do.

I am not like Lorena. I am no optimist; I am a realist. I have no illusions of succeeding, and I don't buy into the "if you only believe" crap. Even if we get on the Heaven Bound, we can't hide forever. They'll find us, and when they do, they're not going to be all buddy-buddy. We're screwing up their oxygen levels and food supplies months before they get to the Mars colony. More likely than not, we'll be killed on sight.

But I can't just sit here and wait to die. Better to greet the day on my own terms than waste away in self-pity. Because there's a chance it could work. Slim and improbable? Absolutely. But still a chance.

In the end, I just want to live. Is that too much to ask?

When Lorena's finished with Duke, we make our way out of the ground. As we reach the edge of the cave, a rolling wave of heat slams into us. I stagger, the change sudden and sharp.

The heat presses itself in and around me, fitting smoothly over my body like a second skin. It squeezes, cutting off everything until I almost suffocate. Gradually, I adjust. My breath comes heavy and slow; sweat slicks my body.

We have reached the surface.

"Damn," Duke says. "It's gotten hotter."

Bethany, an old four seater plane, is a dark smudge against the blackness

of the sky. She is my most prized possession, the last remnant of my mother. Sweat rolls down our backs, and I climb onto Bethany's wing, easing open her cockpit. Metal screeches. I wince; it's almost as bad as Duke snoring.

Lorena wrinkles her nose. "When's the last time you greased that?"

"Bethany is not a that," I say, patting her hull." And the grease ran out with the coffee."

I ease myself into the pilot seat, wait for the others to get settled, and start the engine. Bethany roars to life, her instruments lighting up. My hands fit around the worn controls, easy and familiar. Quickly, I run through the preflight check.

Once I'm sure Bethany is up to speed, I glance in the mirror. "You guys ready? One way or another, we're not coming back."

Lorena's skin is pale in the ghost light, and Duke's face is sharp lines and harsh shadows. He looks to her, and when she nods, he turns to me. "Let's go."

I secure my headset and take off. The ground falls away from beneath me. My breath shortens; my eyes sharpen. My heart slams against my rib cage, a trapped, rabid animal. I need out—out of this planet.

Before the sun, people dreamed. Some wanted to build steel empires and conquer glass cities. Others were born to sing and paint bloody sunsets.

My generation was born into a world of dark suns and deeper despair. We were given a death sentence before we were out of the womb. We have known nothing but desperate gambits to survive. We are staving off the inevitable. We are on borrowed time, and the primitive need to live has kept us from dreaming.

Sometimes when I fly Bethany, I wonder what could have been in the world before the sun. Before it's savage rays pierced the earth, and people learned to fear. Before we buried ourselves deep beneath the ground to hide from the sun's intolerant gaze. I wonder if I could have been a pilot like my mother, whipping through whirling clouds, defying all natural law.



If I was ten years older with an official license and a solid degree on astrophysics, I would be on the Heaven Bound, safe and destined for the stars. But I am ten years too young, and the colleges closed long before the elementary schools.

Things will never be as they were before, and soon, there won't be anytime left for my generation. But when I am in the sky, I know flying is why I was born. Yes, I missed this. This electricity in my veins as the world falls away.

The night is a slithering mass of rolling clouds. Visibility is low, but Bethany's lights are powerful. Dull buildings mar the ground, abandoned and crumbling. Left to disrepair, they rise like broken teeth on a beaten beast.

This is what we leave behind. It is nothing I have ever loved or can ever love, but it is all I have ever known. I watch the ground until swirling clouds asphyxiate the slate city below.

I guide us through the pitch sky silently, memorizing the hum of Bethany's engine. Unless I am very lucky, this will be the last time I fly, and I want to burn the sensation deep into the folds of my brain.

Ten minutes into the flight, I hear static. Air traffic controller is a profession for the old days, but around the Heaven Bound, they're necessary. Resources are far too scarce to be gathered in one area, and flight is the fastest way to get them. Some old towers are still in operation around the world, communicating with the air traffic and guiding pilots to safety.

Of course, there's so little traffic these days that if you have competent instruments and some practice, chances are you won't need any communication. Air traffic control is there more to help pilots find a good spot to refuel and drop off supplies. Something I'm exploiting tonight.

The plan is to pretend to bring in last-minute goods in order to secure a landing spot. From there, we'll avoid the guards and find a place to hide until take off. Once we're in space, we'll stay hidden for a few days, surviving off of our supplies. After that, it comes down to a matter of luck.

I adjust Bethany's radio to the right frequency. "Heaven Bound approach, three-two-two Charlie Juliet."

The transmission goes smoothly. There are so few planes these days that

controllers don't bother to question your credentials. Once we land, that's when the difficult part kicks in. I am cleared for approach and bring Bethany around to Heaven Bound's runway. And holy hell is she beautiful.

Heaven Bound is the size of a small city, her oblong shape extending elegantly to the sky. Her skin glitters, the silver plates melded together seamlessly, her engines rumbling, far off thunder. People, insignificant beneath her, appear small and insectile. She is a giant, and she rises over the entire complex, a vengeful goddess, a ship made for the stars.

"Wow," Lorena breathes.

I nod wordlessly. Despite the ever-present heat, I start to shiver.

Carefully, I slide Bethany inside of Heaven Bound, parking her well-loved frame next to the sleek space fighters of the future. Heaven Bound's interior is white, cavernous, and advanced. Her systems are interconnected in such a way that makes me think we're in the belly of the beast.

Lorena and Duke follow me out of Bethany. Lorena's hand is gripping Duke's so hard her knuckles are white. For his part, Duke is breathless. His mouth opens and closes in a way I would find funny if my last meal wasn't climbing up the back of my throat.

Unable to speak, I make my way behind Bethany. We crouch behind her, and I scan the room nervously.

"Where is everyone, Nikolai?" Lorena whispers. "You said there'd be people."

Duke fidgets with his shirt. "Maybe they're getting ready for takeoff?"

She's launching soon." I frown. "No, people should have been here." My stomach rolls, and I fight to keep myself under control. Something's not right. Duke shifts beside me. "I think we should wait, see—"

The plane next to us explodes. Shrapnel sails through the air, embedding itself into flesh. I slam into a wall. Gasping, I collapse onto all fours. My head rings, my body aches. Blood trickles down my back. Sirens shriek, lights flash, and the world smells of copper and steel.

Figures emerge from the confusion, fuzzy and indistinct. But even in this



state, I have scouted the Heaven Bound too often to mistake guards for civilians. Gasping, I scramble for the others. We need to get out.

Duke is kneeling behind me, listless and motionless, his back to me. I grab his shoulder and freeze.

Lorena is on the ground, her pale hair splayed out, a greedy halo soaking up the growing pool of red beneath her. I know before I see the wound that she is dead.

“Put your hands up!” someone barks out.

I shake uncontrollably. I want to look away, to burn the image of her still body from my mind. I can’t move; I can’t stop trembling.

“Duke,” I grind out.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” his voice is raw, shaking. He whirls toward me, his slate eyes pleading. “She was supposed to live.”

Shots ring out, slamming around us. I don’t think. There isn’t time.

I grab Duke and shove him into Bethany. Bullets punch holes in the glass, and I duck down. Blindly, I grab hold of the instruments and fire up the engine. She roars to life beneath me, and we erupt from the Heaven Bound.

I fly like a madman, twisting and turning. Bullet reports follow us, but fade quickly. Within seconds, they cease altogether. I don’t stop. I can’t stop.

Lorena’s still form haunts me. Sweat and blood slicks Bethany’s controls, my hands cut and torn. Air roars through holes in the fractured glass. Instruments spin and alarms blare. Not good.

I keep my eyes focused ahead, muscles trembling, trying not to think. Instead, I focus on landing. On getting us down from the air without crashing in Bethany’s broken frame.

The plane shudders. I slam forward in my seat. Bethany’s nose points down.

I yank her stick up. It jiggles uselessly. Her instruments spin wildly, and we go down. Falling isn't a stone plummet to the ground, a knife through air. It's going weightless, the straps cutting into my skin, unyielding but not strong enough all at once. It's defying gravity, the blood sloshing forward, backward, up, and down my body, losing my breath.

I see the way the landscape draws closer, but only flashes, little glimpses of smudged landforms and slate buildings mixed in with wisps of clouds and dark skies. White noise roars in my ears so loud it drowns out anything else. As if there ever was anything else. I am a paper plane abused by wind and gravity.

Bethany's alarms blare; we are losing altitude. Animal instinct shoots through me, and I jerk frantically at the stick. It jolts through my clumsy fingers, tumultuous and mocking.

The ground leers up at me, and my heart stops. My lungs won't work. They are cold; I am cold. So cold in this place of excruciating heat.

Turns out, I am afraid to die.

Awareness returns slowly, water trickling across the edges of my vision. The screams come first, muted and unconcerning. Gradually, they grow louder, piercing through the fog of my mind, and pain blossoms inside my skull. Cringing, I try to cover my ears, but I can't move my arms. I try again, but they're heavy, as if the weight of the stars rests on them. Carefully, I breathe in and out, ribs shuddering and screaming in protest. But I am alive. I am alive.

The realization is euphoria. Despite my broken body, I begin to shake. Only then do I open my eyes.

The screaming, I realize, is coming from Duke. He struggles to stand, veins bulging, sweat rolling down his face. Blood and grime coat his hair.

"I'm sorry!" he sobs. "Just bring her back. Please."

I try to get up, but twisted metal is tangled around me. The ruined fragments of Bethany are scattered all around us. Orange fire burns, and smoke billows to the sky. I am ensnared, tangled in the wreckage of



melting metal and broken wires.

I struggle anyways, and Duke's shouts rail against the shattered fragments of my consciousness. Pain intertwines itself in my abdomen, cutting deep. I hiss through gritted teeth.

Duke collapses, his labored breathing rattling like a coin in a tin can. "I'm sorry," he says. "I'm so sorry."

"Duke."

"I told them," he sobs.

I freeze. "Told them?" The realization comes sharp and clear. A knife across my chest. Duke sold us out.

Duke keeps rambling. "I'm sorry. We weren't going to make it. We couldn't and—"

"You killed her," my voice comes out raspy and shrill, rusty hinges in severe need of oiling. "You never loved her, did you? You never f—"

"I do! I love Lorena!" Duke sobs, his voice broken glass. "I love her," he repeats, as if he's unsure himself. Tears stream down his face, his slate eyes glassy, and he looks up to the sky, to where the Heaven Bound rises in the distance, an arrow to the sky.

I do not think of the way Duke looked at Lorena, of the way he gave me the last cup of coffee. I don't think of his impassioned debates, of the bags beneath his eyes. Instead, I think of Lorena, pale and bloody on Heaven Bound's floor.

I taste copper and spit blood. I am shaking, fury and adrenaline arcing through my veins.

"You told them."

"What the hell else was I supposed to do?" Duke is hysterical, his eyes frantic and wild. "Bethany's radio was right there, and we weren't going to make it. They promised she would make it. They promised."

I laugh, and it tastes bitter and angry on my tongue. "She didn't."

Duke shrinks back, his breath ragged. "What have I done?"

I don't have an answer for him. I collapse onto the ground, fatigue and throbbing pain made worse by the growing heat. I turn my eyes up to the sky.

It's beginning to lighten, the first edges of sooty dawn breaking through the hazy clouds. It is the first dawn I have seen in years. With sudden clarity, I know it will be the last. We are alone and injured, left to the mercy of the day on a scraggy stretch of desert.

The sun is rising, and we have no where to hide.



DAUGHTER, I TOLD YOU, YOU WERE NOT ALLOWED TO TURN SEVEN

By: Meg Clawson

but yesterday, you did it anyways.
Which means next year you will be eight,
Piaget's year of concrete operations
and you will gradually stop
believing in the tooth fairy.
The place I keep your baby teeth,
the leaf shaped dish
holds quarters and dust
and your white artifacts,
a collection so valuable,
if the house were on fire,
I'd grab your milk teeth
and run.

A HOUSE

By: Jordan Burbage

in the dark, our parade to the shore
outshines the moon, stealing a piece of sun
for each lilting lighthouse slung
low over somber, sleepy shoulders.

on the sand we try to unburden,
let our load sink snug into a place
we are sure is free of stone, even.
flat enough that the windows stay shut
when we turn to face warm morning.

surely, storm-whipped waves will short
the dawn-borrowed bulb and break cracks
in the panes, the tide tumbling
the foundation to show it never was
sure as the footing that carried it.

soon passing ships avoid that place,
their own path guided by stars
never bright enough to distill
the fear in a seacoast dark of day.

...

at first it isn't difficult to accept
the idea that home is to travel
at our sides, in our hearts, on our backs
like a thing only we know the weight of,
never more than light-heavy.

then, we simply wait for the flare,
a sign our theft has been forgiven
and the chance to begin again.
For now, we cannot see.



CONFLICTION

By: Gabriel Hartman

The skies darken as a myriad of black and steel clouds fill the heavens; freezing cold rain pours down from above like shards of glass. I trudge along the asphalt path, my umbrella looms overhead like a skyscraper shrugging off the deluge. Like a practiced explorer, I had blazed this path numerous times before. The focus of my journeys thus far had always been to become stronger, to push through the hills and the twists and the turns, rushing past the world around me like a frantic businessman late for his afternoon meeting. Intently focused on the searing pain in my legs as the burning sensation crept its way down to my toes, I would remain oblivious to this beautiful world around me. The powerful trees with ripe sweet smelling apples, the vibrant green farmland surrounded by tall pristine fences of white; all ignored as I would rush past. For the first time I experienced the world soaked in freshly fallen summer rain rather than the sweat of hard work and perseverance. Is it justifiable to deny yourself the beauty of this world for the purpose of personal growth?

I spot my destination. A pergola made of thick slabs of mahogany rests atop ancient pillars of cinder blocks. Rich ivy drapes itself like a pair of lavish curtains over the pergola producing an air of mystery. With my interest suddenly peaked, I accept the silent invitation and proceed further. Endless rows of brightly colored flowers, ranging from vibrant yellow orchids to dulcet purple tulips. The floral aroma is pleasantly intoxicating, compelling me forward towards the entrance. Ironically enough, I am not so infatuated with the wonderous sights around me that I fail to notice what I can only assume was a God-given warning. Cobbling towards me at an alarming rate is an old woman dressed in a motley patchwork of plaid and faux furs. She protectively clutches her bags to her chest and hobbles past me, a look of fear and urgency in her eyes. Fear drapes my soul like a tattered old tablecloth, and anxiety violently grasps at my neck. Why was she so afraid? Tensions rise like the ocean tides drawn by the full unbridled power of the moon. Yet the glorious sight I was beholden to lay my fears to rest. Beautifully symmetrical stacks of apples ranging from shiny fire truck red, to clear emerald green. Stacks of tan hay bales tinted with dirt, lay on the pathway which in it of itself is blanketed in a variety of leaves, reminiscent of a bag of M&M's. A scarecrow's eyes meet mine, and as he smiles the fear is suddenly dispelled from my mind. I return the favor in kind and move forward. Leaves crunch underfoot sticking to my shoes; my leg brushes against the hay bales, leaving its bloody mark as I pass by. Is a trap of commerce

justified if the victim feels compelled to fall into it?

With my stride full of confidence and gravitas, I enter the store. Neigh immediately I find myself whisked back to much simpler times. I see jars of bright red, sickeningly sweet strawberry jam like my Mom would spread on toast after our morning walks. The delightful mingling of chocolate and yeast rises grabs me by the nose and pulls me to the back of the store. Crème Brulee with a shiny golden crust, pumpkin tarts with a sprinkling of rich dark cocoa. Memories of visiting the locals farmers market with my grandmother resurface; I can suddenly taste the pastries she used to buy me all the time. I feel my temptations rising. I look upwards and a towering display of brightly colored candies towers tall over the store filled with all manner of treats ranging from glistening brown tootsie rolls, to pastel tarts. I reminisce of the olden days; dressing up in costumes and consuming innumerable handfuls of these sickeningly sweet candies. A moment of clarity strikes me like a cartoon anvil smacking me upside the head. Our memories allow us to reexperience the happiest time of our lives, is it appropriate that others should take advantage of them for their own gain?

I make haste, quick as the wind I purchase only what is necessary. Like a ring master turning on his coattails as the grand finale concludes, I make my exit. The clouds have parted as I proclaim my exodus. I leave, having gained an understanding of the older woman's plight, of her confliction. Our lives are in constant conflict, but if we can overcome or at least understand them, is it truly possible that we can become stronger?



DAD

By: Victoria Blonder

When you give your dad a teddy bear
It usually means hes dying

When you give your dad a teddy bear
Your mom she says "he's trying"

When you give your dad a teddy bear
Theres blood running through a tube
From into him and out of you

When you give your dad a teddy bear
You sit and make your cooking mama food

When you give your dad a teddy bear
Beep
Beep
Beep
Dr. Shelby to 302

When you give your dad a teddy bear

When you give your dad a teddy bear

When you give your dad a teddy bear

Code
Blue

AVES

By: Alesandra Temerte, Central Bucks East High School, 2nd place, Poetry, 11-12th Grade

We love like birds,
tragic doves
clinging to olive branches,
searching for peace in our hearts—

how gently can you soar?

We sing like sparrows,
chirping poetry into the wind,
sharing secrets with our beaks—

it's a shame
our lyrics never meet.

We live like nightingales,
flying under the moon
but stumbling to see—

don't you think the stars are fleeting?

How long can a peacock
hide its feathers
before they unfurl the truth?

How much time passes
until a swan
forgets its journey?

We break like vultures,
screaming
as our wings flare open,
swooping down and trusting

we
won't
fall—

sometimes the most ferocious birds still do.



PICKING UP CUPS

By: Ann Onymous

My scalp stung as she tugged at the roots of my hair, French braiding in a method that can only be described as truly aggressive. Her raspy voice broke the silence. "You look so much like your mother, it's amazing! I wonder if she chose that, after your sister." I paused, trying not to shift my head.

"Um, well... she's my biological mom you know, so I do look like her". She yanked another strand of my hair, reeling it into the braid with force.

"I just think that it must be insane having a kid that doesn't look anything like you and one that does". Her voice's judgment reverberated into my skull through her hands, now almost done, the braid reaching the nape of my neck. "And it must be crazy, learning to feel like sisters, even though you aren't the same. I wouldn't think you could ever be as close as real sisters" she added. I rolled my eyes, knowing she wouldn't see.

That insecure, selfish, all-knowing Karen Steele always chipped away at my sanity. It was the way she asked questions, her foul breath pushing the words out into the air with great effort, as if she was the very first person to ever discover such a family. No, it was one step further than that - she acted as if she was the only person alive who was intelligent enough to consider the matter. I don't believe I've ever seen her face not all screwed up about something, her dirty blond hair brushing past the farmer's tan on her shoulders as she whips her head around, green eyes glazing over into a murky grey. As the elastic band knotted around the ends of my hair, I was free to make my escape from her piercing, downward gaze. I wondered if she offered to do my hair before the goat show just so she'd have me captive long enough to dig her claws into me.

As rude as she was, I often forget that other people don't always understand sisters who don't look alike. However, despite our different colored skin, four-year age gap, and contrasting personalities Stacy and I have always been close. So close in fact, that our mother used to joke that our connection rivals that of twins - complete with some words and phrases only we can understand. While the onslaught of inside jokes can hardly be compared with the "twin talk" my mother was referring to, it's true that our bond has always been an incredibly important part of our lives. Our adventures began on the living room floor where we traveled almost

everywhere together. Dolls, toy cars, and stuffed animals had their own lives and plot lines, ours to map out. Stacy being older than me always kept things interesting. It could never just be Barbies, it had to be Barbie's murder mystery. Stuffed animals had passports crafted from index cards, Rosie Bear was a flight attendant, Zebra a pilot. How many books did we read together, shrieking at the terrible endings until we rewrote them ourselves?

How much time did we spend watching old Forensic Files reruns on TV or doing homework or complaining about god knows what? Each mundane moment was filled with chatter, all the difficult times shared. Unsurprisingly, it was an adjustment for both of us when she left for college four years ago.

Suddenly, our time was spent in entirely different places and frames of mind. She was off learning, exploring, experiencing college life and I was still here, at home. She had new and exciting friends, boyfriends, internships, jobs, and I had the same old rules my parents made us live by. It's strange being the baby of the family, in the end, you become sort of an odd type of only child. The atmosphere was vapid without her companionship, the lighthearted dramatics of our household absent. Those crazy things like screeching whenever one of us saw a spider in the house, there just wasn't any point in making a scene for anymore. I missed her. I had to grow used to spending more time alone, while also adjusting to the practical changes that her absence caused. Let's face it, I'd always been the responsible one, so the household chores didn't increase all that much without her. But many things surprised me. My dog began to cling to me because without her he craved attention. I found my mom asked for double the amount of tech support – showing her how to set her Facebook wall to “most recent” became my morning routine. On the other hand, there were things that just didn't need doing. The house was clear of the empty plates, bowls, and cups she'd leave around that I'd pick up when I didn't want our parents to get irritated.

I never realized how much of my time I spent taking care of my sister, or more accurately, taking care of the way her behavior made my parents feel. She liked to go out and have fun, and our parents are strict and protective - the whole works. It caused a tension in our home: my sister could not understand where my parents were coming from and they could not understand what it is like to be young. I'm not quite sure how I managed to take on the role of mediator, but my family held me to it - somehow it was always my job to keep the peace. I guess I was just good at smoothing things over, navigating the minefields of communication of a family



moving from having young children grow into teenagers and even worse, the early signs of adulthood. Of course, with my sister away at college, I couldn't have answers to my parent's questions; I didn't know what she was up to all the time. I wasn't in the middle anymore and letting go of that misplaced responsibility was an unexpected relief. I navigated my own mediations with our parents, spending more of my time out of the house being social and working on my own projects.

I continued those goat shows, even if it meant facing Karen Steele more and more. You would think that she'd have found new people to bother, but that's just not her style. Every time I saw her my entire brain sighed. I knew what was coming: the criticism, the worry, the questions. She hated that I competed well, placing above her daughter. Circling the wooden panels of the show ring, she'd survey how each judge worked with us, gathering material for her future meltdown. When the class was dismissed, I'd head out of the ring with my goat and start making my way back to the pens. Dodging the crowd, I'd finally make it and there would be Karen standing by the gate, ready to complain. She'd soak up all my time this way, telling me how the show is rigged or the judge was biased. Learning to politely ignore Karen was a skill I began to develop in order to enjoy my time showing. Her constant negativity was just not something I wanted to be around, and while I couldn't bring myself to be unkind to her, it was time to stop being her punching bag. Eventually, I met a group of people there who I could surround myself with. We worked very hard with our animals, preparing them for the long days of exhibition. So many sleep-deprived weeks of clipping hair just right and trimming hooves, milking, bathing, and walking our goats. Show days we would spend eight or more hours in the ring, setting our goat's legs right, paying attention to the judge, competing with and against each other. Then the evenings would come, and we would just be fairgoers going on rides and buying enormous amounts of kettle corn, fried Oreos, barbecued anything on-a-stick until we fell asleep in our tents on the dusty floor of the pole-barn, ready to do it over again the next day.

Our friendships grew outside of showing after a time. We'd get terribly lost together trying to drive somewhere and go around the Flemington circle three or four times, or spontaneously buy some rabbits when we only set out to go to Taco Bell. The poorly planned parties, holidays, normal days just hanging out for no reason just felt uncharacteristically normal. Being apart from Stacy altered my daily life, but it also caused me to have stronger relationships with my own friends. Through them I had found a firmer grasp on the bridge to the outside world, one where my identity could be

based in the choices I make and the type of person I am, not in the things I'm told to do or not to do, or in being someone's daughter, sister, or whoever.

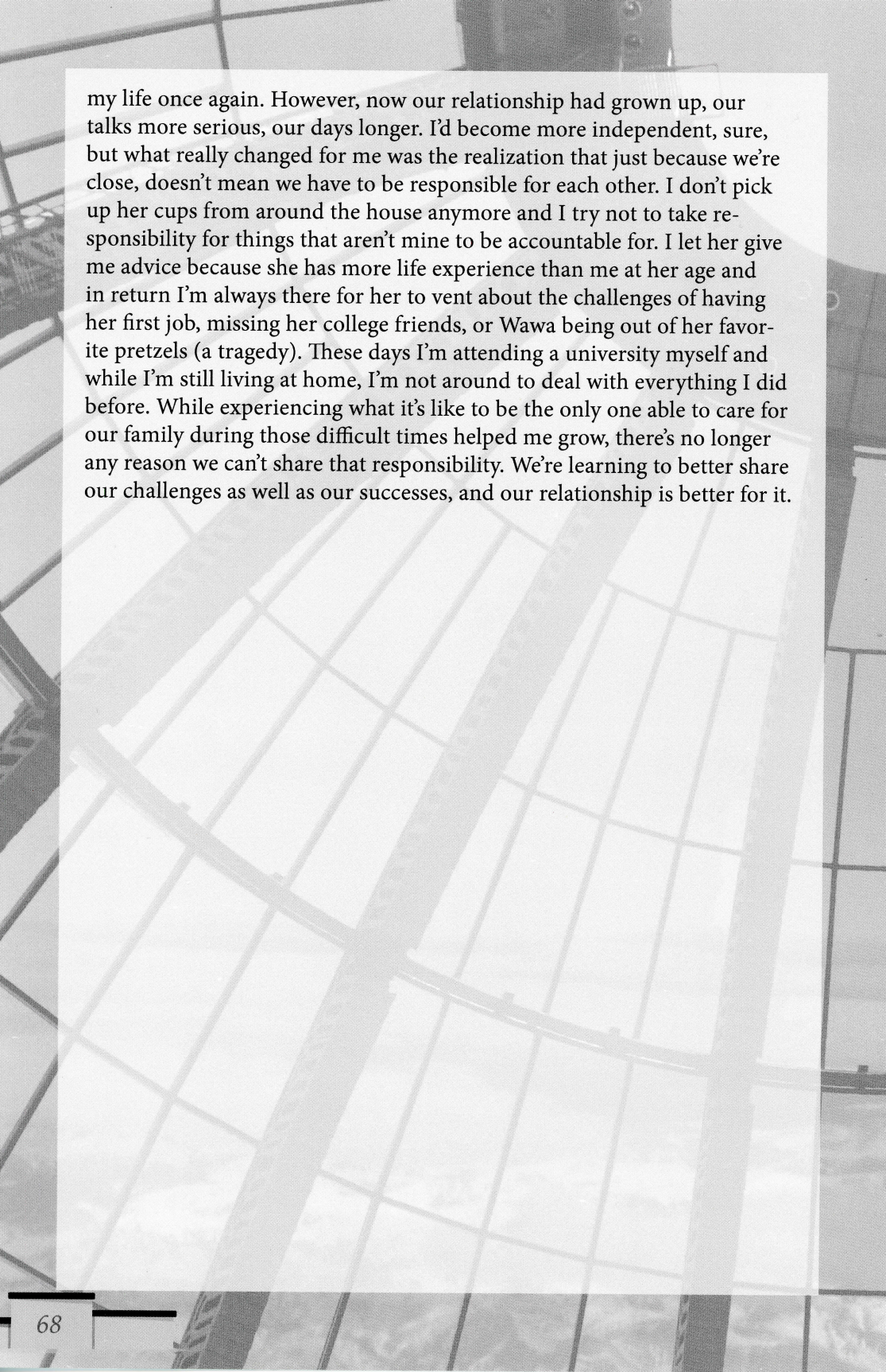
All of this came to a halt one winter when I felt my sister's absence in an entirely new way. It was one of those times where it's not really snowing, it's just so despondently, overwhelmingly cold. My Mother continued to struggle with her disability, while my Dad kept catching viruses, leaving me to care for her. He'd have the flu for weeks and I'd have these little blips of time where I'd take a hiatus from being a teenager and function as a real adult. The long days of cooking and cleaning and caring for people, side-eyeing my mother's frail immune system as I listened to my Dad's coughing fits, studying at night – I could handle it. I didn't complain, it was appropriate given the situation. But it was the first time I had ever really felt alone like that, with the knowledge that I was simply it creeping into the back of my mind. There was no adult looking over my shoulder, no backup if I became ill too. I thought of Stacy studying, out with her friends maybe. She wasn't that far away, but she might as well have been. I wouldn't ask her to come home, I just handled it, hoped for the best. As much as I had grown to be more carefree with my friends, I'd also found greater responsibility that winter. Others were relying on me, and that was startling. For me, that was the first step to understanding what adulthood is like.

One dim, rainy spring day I watched my sister walk for her graduation. In a herd of crimson gowns and bedazzled caps, my eyes hurriedly scanned the stuffy auditorium for her face. Holding the stiff, glossy program I tried to pronounce all the accomplishments next to her name. "Something Latin smart", I concluded. Sticking her tongue out at me, she identified herself as her carefree, hilariously obnoxious self. I rolled my eyes at her, but inside I was filled only with pride.

Despite everything in these past four years, I wanted nothing more for her than the accomplishment of this goal, another thing we have always shared: the desire for a higher education in our greatest passions. Her interest in public service and mine in animal sciences, we don't often share topics. However her example of hard work, earning not just her paralegal degree, but a bachelor's in political science at the same time, motivates me daily.

When Stacy moved back home, I found in many ways, we're still just as close. The nightly blaring of our cover of Toto's "Africa" and movie marathons and impromptu ice-cream trips to Owowcow slipped back into





my life once again. However, now our relationship had grown up, our talks more serious, our days longer. I'd become more independent, sure, but what really changed for me was the realization that just because we're close, doesn't mean we have to be responsible for each other. I don't pick up her cups from around the house anymore and I try not to take responsibility for things that aren't mine to be accountable for. I let her give me advice because she has more life experience than me at her age and in return I'm always there for her to vent about the challenges of having her first job, missing her college friends, or Wawa being out of her favorite pretzels (a tragedy). These days I'm attending a university myself and while I'm still living at home, I'm not around to deal with everything I did before. While experiencing what it's like to be the only one able to care for our family during those difficult times helped me grow, there's no longer any reason we can't share that responsibility. We're learning to better share our challenges as well as our successes, and our relationship is better for it.

IN REAL LIFE

By: Meg Clawson

When I was seven,
 and my bedroom lampshade
threw a warlock's shadow
 on my floral,
forget-me-not wallpaper,

 I would eventually
fall asleep into a
 choose-your-own-adventure
type dream— where my glider
 is going down—

and I get to decide
 if I turn to page 12
and make an emergency landing
 in a dangerous Amazonian region,
or go to page 57
 and allow my parachute
to open as I jump out
 over a poppy field.

When I was seven,
 I had complete control
over my dreams.
 If I was in danger, I simply said,
“rub your eyes, wake up,”
 or “gently fall into that field ”
and it was so.

 Not like in real life:
When he came home,
 he decided:
belt or kindling,
 hanger or hand.



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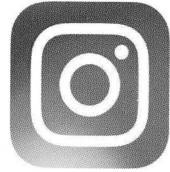


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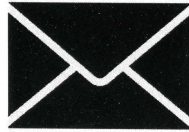
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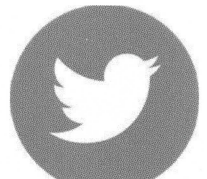
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